English complement clauses: *that* clauses and similar creatures

1. Definition: A complement clause is a grammatical clause is used to finish out, or complement, a sentence, in that the clause itself functions as a subject or object of a sentence. Consider the following. A noun phrase (NP) like *the lizard* can function as a subject of the sentence, but a whole that clause can also serve as a subject.

   The lizard surprised me.
   That the lizard got into my drawer surprised me.

The complement clause is equivalent to a regular subject noun phrase [NP], and means “the fact that X”.

   [That the lizard got into my drawer] [NP ] surprised me.
   = (The fact) that the lizard got into my drawer surprised me.

However, this style is formal. It would be more natural to move the subject complement clause to the end of the sentence, and fill the subject slot with *it*, which serves a place-holder for the moved subject clause.

   It surprised me that the lizard got into my drawer.

A number of verbs can take subject complements as in these examples, especially where the complements represent some kind of fact. This is especially common with verbs of emotion. Also, intransitive verb expressions of logical result also take such clauses.

   It { surprises, annoys, irritates, amazes, ...} me that the lizard got into my drawer.
   It { follows, stands to reason, matters, ...} that someone put it there.

Many intransitive verbs of “happening” also occur with such clauses, usually if not always before the *that* clauses.

   It { turns out, happens, seems, appears...} that someone put it there.

Many verbs can take a *that* complement clause as a direct object of the verb. The complement clause is equivalent to an NP object. This is especially common with verbs of perception, emotion, communication, mental activity, and evidence. Again, the *that* clause refers to a fact, and the whole fact expressed in the sentence is the object of the main clause verb.

   I know him.
   I know that he is going to Kiribati.
I know [NP] [that he is going to Kiribati].

{fear, believe, sense, feel, think, say, can prove, understand, can tell, anticipate, expect, perceive, notice, am afraid, am happy, am amazed, am surprised...}

...that he is going to Kiribati.

**Adjectives and nouns + comp. clauses**

A number of adjectives can take a *that* complement clause to complete their meanings. The complement clause can occur in subject position at the beginning of the sentence, or at the end of the sentence with it in the subject position of the main clause verb.

That Cecil would go to Kiribati is odd. It’s odd that Cecil would go to Kiribati.

That a lizard was in my drawer is weird. It’s weird that a lizard was in my drawer.

These structures are possible with a large number of adjectives in English: *odd, unusual, expected, surprising, natural, obvious, evident, apparent, doubtful, possible, important, etc.*

A few noun phrases can take a *that* clause to complete their meaning, mainly nouns that express ideas, facts, mental states, and modal ideas (like modal verbs in meaning – *must, should, can*).

The {fact, possibility, suggestion, idea, thought, belief, perception, knowledge, understanding, report, fear...} that lizards can be cute/ugly is not important right now.

**Equivalents**

Complement clauses with *that* can sometimes be expressed with infinitive phrases, though this may sound less natural or more formal in many cases. Changing the *that* clause to an infinitive complement clause is often possible with subject, object, and adjective complement that clauses. If the infinitive has a subject, it is preceded by *for*, which serves simply to mark infinitive subjects.

For Cecil to go to Kiribati is surprising.

= It is surprising that Cecil is going to Kiribati.

Similarly, the infinitive complement can be moved to the end, and the placeholder it is put in the main subject slot.

It would be surprising for him to go to Greenland.

It was unexpected for Cecil to go to Kiribati.

It would be an interesting experience to go to Greenland would be an interesting experience.

A change to an infinitive complement is not possible with a noun + *that* clause; it is also not possible with some verbs and adjectives, especially with most verbs of emotion and perception:

{anticipate, obvious, feel, sense, think, perceive, notice, prove, discern...} him to go there.
Many times the infinitive clause is not really equivalent to the *that* clause, especially in more complex structures or with different tenses. While that clauses have a regular verb and refer to a specific fact, infinitive clauses are tenseless, so they can take on other meanings like hypothetical statements or conditions.

It’s surprising that he would go to Greenland.
= The fact that he would plan to go there is surprising.

For him to go to Greenland would be surprising.
= If he went there, it would be surprising.

Some infinitive phrases have no equivalent *that* clauses. Attempting to rephrase some as that clauses will lead to awkward or ungrammatical expressions – as in the case with a noun that cannot take a *that* clause, or the infinitive without a subject (*that* clauses must have subjects).

For me to go to Greenland would be an interesting experience.
(?!) That I go to Greenland would be an interesting experience.

To put a lizard in my drawer is a mean thing to do.
(?) That ? put a lizard in my drawer is a mean thing to do.

Another complement equivalent expression is the gerund phrase, which is different from the other complement clauses in that its meaning emphasizes the action or process itself, rather than the factuality of *that* clauses or the possibility of infinitive clauses. If a gerund has a subject, the subject is in possessive form (though in older, more formal style a regular noun plus a participle is used).

His putting a penguin in my bathtub was a really strange idea.
Cecil’s going to Greenland will be an interesting vacation.
(or older style: Him putting a penguin in my bathtub..., Cecil going to Greenland...)